

How to Empathize

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Last Updated: October 21, 2020

Empathy is the ability to feel what other people feel - the key to forming **meaningful relationships** and coexisting **peacefully** with others. Some people are born with a natural ability to empathize, and others find it harder to **relate** to other people. But if you feel your ability to put yourself in other people's shoes is lacking, there are many things you can do to deepen your sense of empathy. This article discusses the meaning of empathy and steps you can take right away to become a more empathetic person.

Part 1

Part 1 of 3: Tapping Into Your Empathy



1 Get in touch with your own emotions. To feel emotions along with someone else, you've got to be able to feel them in yourself. Are you tuned in to your feelings? Do you notice when you're feeling happy, sad, angry or afraid? Do you let these feelings rise to the surface, and do you express them? If you tend to tamp down your emotions instead of allowing them to be part of your life, work on letting yourself feel a bit more deeply.^[1]

- It's pretty common to push aside negative feelings. For example, it's more fun to distract yourself with TV or go to the bar than it is to sit down and think about something upsetting that happened. But pushing feelings aside creates a disconnect, a lack of familiarity. When you can't express your own sadness, how can you expect to feel someone else's?
- Take time every day to let your emotions surface. Instead of hurriedly blocking out negative feelings, think them through. Be **angry** and afraid, and deal with the feelings in a healthy way, like by **crying**, or **writing your thoughts down**, or discussing how you feel with a friend.



- 2 Listen carefully.** Hear what the person is saying, and notice the inflection in their voice.
^[2] **Observe** all the little clues that belie a way that someone is feeling. Maybe her lip is trembling and her eyes are glistening. Maybe it's more subtle - she's looking down a lot, or she seems vacant. Put yourself aside and absorb the person's story.
- **Set aside judgement while you listen.** If you find yourself remembering a disagreement you had, or feeling critical about the person's choices, or feeling anything that takes you out of the moment, struggle to reorient yourself into listening mode.^[3]



- 3 Pretend that you're the other person.** Have you ever read a moving story that was so engaging, you forgot yourself? For a few minutes there, you became that character, and you knew exactly how it would feel to see your father for the first time in 10 years or lose your love to someone else. Feeling empathy in a person isn't so different. When you're listening to someone and really trying to understand, a moment will come when you start feeling what the other person is feeling. You'll see a glimpse of what it means to be them.



4 Don't be afraid to feel uncomfortable. Empathy can be painful! It hurts to absorb someone else's pain, and it takes effort to engage on such a deep level. Perhaps that's why empathy is on the decline - it's just easier to keep conversations light, to stay safely self-contained. If you want to be more empathetic, you can't shy away from people's feelings. Realize that they're going to have an effect on you and that you might come away feeling different. But you'll have a deeper understanding of the other person, a foundation on which to build a more [solid connection](#).



5 Show the other person you feel for them. Ask questions that show you're listening. Use body language that shows you're engaged: make eye contact, lean in a little, don't fidget. Nod, shake your head, or smile when it's appropriate to do so. These are all ways to show your empathy in the moment, to build trust with the person who is sharing feelings with you. If you seem distracted, look away, or give other cues that you're not listening or you aren't interested, the person will probably close up and stop sharing.

- Another way to show empathy is to share yourself, too. Making yourself as vulnerable as the other person is can build trust and mutual connection. Let down your guard and get into the conversation.



6 Use your empathy to help other people. Being empathetic toward someone is a learning experience, and it's good to let the knowledge you gained influence your future actions. Maybe that means [standing up for someone who gets bullied a lot](#), because you understand him better now. It might change the way you behave next time you meet someone new, or your views on certain social or political issues. Let empathy influence the way you move through the world.

Part 2 of 3: Developing Greater Empathy



1 Be open to learning more about what you don't understand. Empathy stems from the desire to know more about other people, other experiences. Get curious about what life is like for people who aren't you. **Make it a point to learn as much as you can about other things every day.** Here are a few ways to act on your curiosity:

- **Travel more.** When you go to places you've never visited, make a point of spending time with people who live there and getting to know more about the way of life.
- **Talk to strangers.** If you find yourself sitting next to someone on a bus, strike up a conversation instead of burying your nose in a book.
- **Get out of your regular routine.** If you tend to hang out with the same people and go to the same places all of the time, mix it up and start meeting new people. **Expand your world a little.**



2 Try harder to empathize with people you don't like. If you notice areas where your empathy is lacking, make it a point to change how you feel, or at least gain a greater understanding of people and groups you don't like. The moment you feel repelled by someone, ask yourself why. Decide that instead of avoiding or badmouthing that person, you're going to put yourself in their shoes. Find out what you can learn by being empathetic toward people you don't like.

- Remember that even if you don't reach some kind of agreement, you can still feel empathetic. It's possible to feel empathy for someone you actively dislike. And who knows, once you open yourself up a bit, you might find reasons to change your mind about the person.



3 Make a point to ask people how they feel. This is a simple way to generate instances of empathy on a daily basis. Instead of considering emotional talk off-limits, ask people about their emotions more often, and really listen to their responses. This doesn't mean that every conversation has to get deep, solemn and philosophical. But asking people how they feel can help you engage more fully, and really see the person you're talking to.[4]

- The other side of the coin is to respond more truthfully when someone asks you how you feel. Instead of saying "Great!" when you actually feel down, why not express the truth? See what happens when you put your emotions out there a bit more instead of keeping them contained.



4 Read and watch more fiction. Absorbing a lot of stories, in the form of novels, films, and other media is a good way to develop your sense of empathy. Studies show that reading literary fiction actually improves your ability to empathize in real life.[5] It helps you get in the habit of imagining what life would be like if you were someone else. The catharsis of laughing or crying along with character can help you be more emotionally open with people.



5 Practice empathy with someone you trust. If you're having trouble knowing whether you're empathetic, try practicing empathy with someone else. Make sure the person knows that you want to work on this, so they'll understand if you don't hit just the right note. Ask the person to tell you how they feel, and practice all the steps above to feel along with them. Then tell the person how you feel as a result of what they told you.^[6]

- See if the feelings matched up. If the person expressed sadness, and you felt sad when they were talking, then you **read their emotions correctly**.
- If the feelings didn't match up, you may need to spend more time getting in tune with your own emotions and practice recognizing emotions in other people.

Part 3 of 3: Understanding the Power of Empathy



1 See it as sharing someone's emotions. Empathy is the ability to feel with someone. It requires you to go below the surface and **experience the same emotions someone else is experiencing**. It's easy to get empathy mixed up with sympathy, which is when you pity someone for their misfortune, and perhaps act on that feeling to try to help. But empathy runs deeper: rather than feeling *for* someone, you feel *with* them.

- For example, let's say your sister begins to cry as she tells you that her boyfriend just broke up with her. As you watch the tears roll down her face and listen to her describe what happened, you feel your own throat start to tighten. You don't just feel sorry for her, you feel sad, too. That's empathy.
- Another way to look at empathy is to see it as a shared understanding, an ability to project yourself into someone else's experience. The idea of trying to walk a mile in someone else's shoes is a description of feeling empathy.
- Being empathetic means sharing in any kind of emotion - it doesn't have to be a negative one. Being empathetic is being tuned in to all of a person's feelings and emotions so that you get a sense of what it's like to be that person.



2 Realize you can feel it for anyone. You don't have to have a similar background to someone else to feel empathy for them. It's not about having a shared understanding because you've been there, too. In fact, you can feel empathy for people with whom you have nothing in common. Being empathetic is about experiencing what someone else is feeling - whatever it is. It doesn't have to be something you've felt before.

- This means you can feel empathy for anyone. A young person can empathize with an elderly person in a nursing home, even though she has clearly never had that experience. A rich person can empathize with someone who is homeless, even if he has always been privileged to have a roof over his head and plenty to eat. You can feel empathy for a stranger on the train you're watching from across the aisle.
- To put it another way, being empathetic doesn't mean imagining what life must be like for someone - it means actually feeling what life is like for that person on an emotional level.



3 See that you don't have to agree with someone to empathize with them. In fact, it's still possible to be empathetic toward someone if you completely disagree with their views and don't even like them very much. The person you don't like is still human and has the same range of emotions as you. It might not be easy to do, but you can still empathize with that person's pain and suffering, just as you would for someone you love.[7]

- For example, let's say your neighbor is on the opposite end of the political spectrum from you, and he brings up views you think you are completely wrong at every opportunity. But if you saw him get hurt, you'd come to his aid.
- It might be even more important to develop the ability to empathize with people you don't like. Empathy helps us see each other as people in need of love and consideration, no matter what. It creates the possibility of **peace**.



4 Forget the "do unto others" rule. George Bernard Shaw said, "Do not do unto others as you would have them do unto you—they might have different tastes." The "Golden Rule" doesn't really apply when it comes to empathy, because it doesn't help you understand what it's like to be someone else. Being empathetic means opening yourself to someone else's point of view, someone else's "tastes," instead of imposing your own experiences and ideas.

- Thinking about how you'd like to be treated can serve as a good starting point for **respectful** and **conscientious**, but to be empathetic, you have to go a little deeper. It's difficult to do, and it might even feel uncomfortable. But the more you do it, the deeper your understanding of the people around you will be.



5 See why empathy matters. Empathy improves quality of life on both a personal and social level. It helps you feel more connected to the people around you and creates a sense of shared meaning. What's more, humans' ability to experience empathy for people different from them leads to big social gains. It helps individuals and groups get past racism, homophobia, sexism, classism, and other social problems. It's the foundation of social cooperation and mutual aid.^[8] Without empathy, where would we be?

- A recent study showed that the empathy level among college students has dropped 40% over the last 20 - 30 years.^[9] This suggests that empathy is, at least in part, something that can be learned or unlearned.
- By getting in touch with your sense of empathy and making it a priority every day, you can improve your ability to be empathetic - and see how your life improves as a result.



Expert Q&A

Question

How can I start building empathy?



Annie Lin, MBA
Life & Career Coach
Expert Answer

It all starts with being in touch with your own emotions. Take a few minutes throughout your day to check on how you're feeling and why you're feeling that way.

Helpful 2 Not Helpful 0

Question

How can I recognize my own emotions?



Annie Lin, MBA
Life & Career Coach
Expert Answer

It can help if you keep a journal about your mood and how you're feeling. That way, you can track when you're feeling happy, angry, sad, or excited.

Helpful 2 Not Helpful 0



Tips

- Use your perception and emotions as a guideline, and to make suggestions.
- The likelihood is that you will not achieve a complete picture of the scenario, but this should not be a problem.
- This requires a rather active, caring mind to work properly. It may not always work.
- Do not believe that your view on the scenario is the right one; everyone will view it in a slightly different way.
- If you are having difficulty clearly imagining the scene, try to compare it with an experience of your own similar to the one you are trying to envision.
- Empathy is not a physical, finite procedure. It can be spontaneous (indeed, unwanted), or it could be brought on by the tiniest glimpse of a scenario.



Warnings

- If the emotions are strong enough, they can often leave you feeling a similar way for a while after empathy is felt. This can potentially be dangerous if it is a particularly depressing topic. If this happens, don't worry. try to think of as many happy memories as possible and perhaps try to counter the depressive empathy with joyful empathy.

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This article was co-authored by **Annie Lin, MBA**. Annie Lin is the founder of New York Life Coaching, a life and career coaching service based in Manhattan. Her holistic approach, combining elements from both Eastern and Western wisdom traditions, has made her a highly sought-after personal coach. Annie's work has been featured in Elle Magazine, NBC News, New York Magazine, and BBC World News. She holds an MBA degree from Oxford Brookes University. Annie is also the founder of the New York Life Coaching Institute which offers a comprehensive life coach certification program. Learn more: <https://newyorklifecoaching.com> This article has been viewed 74,750 times.

★★★★★
6 votes - 97%

Co-authors: **17**
Updated: **October 21, 2020**
Views: **74,750**

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